

Kepha: The Brotherhood of the Iron Will

By Brent Zeringue

Standing in the delivery room at 2AM, a joyous father cradled his newborn son. Dad tenderly kissed him on the head and thanked God for this blessed addition as he looked lovingly from his son to his wife. Twelve years later he knelt next to his son at 2 AM for an hour with Jesus in the adoration chapel. They had awakened with other dads and their sons in prayerful silence for "Yawns for Christ!" All were dressed in purple shirts. Purple represents the Dynamic Orthodoxy and Infectious Joy that defines Kepha because it honors Christ the King.

Kepha is the Aramaic word for "Rock," the word Jesus used to rename a smelly fisherman named Simon to whom he gave "the keys to the kingdom of heaven." Kepha is also the father-son organization that is referred to as The Brotherhood of the Iron Will. Kepha is high-octane Catholicism fueling fathers and sons to a holy manliness that contradicts a life of spiritual laziness and moral compromise. Its charism mirrors the life of Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, the championship skier, mountain climber and practical joker from Turin, Italy.

As a boy, Pier Giorgio taught his horse to genuflect whenever it passed a church. He was the saintly instigator who challenged his friends to a game of pool. If they won, he'd pay them money. If he won, they had to accompany him to adoration. Pier Giorgio rarely lost, so with laughter and joy he led his rowdy friends through the streets Turin so they could kneel together before the hidden Jesus. He also organized his friends into a group devoted to faith and service intermingled with mountain climbing and games. Pier Giorgio's spirit is reflected in Kepha's motto: "Play Hard, Pray Hard!"

This spirit of Pier Giorgio permeates Kepha. The men and boys of Kepha have had "piggy" competitions along a stream to see who could get the dirtiest. They rode mountain bikes in Colorado, played Frisbee golf in Mississippi and threw rocks at garfish while canoeing in Arkansas River. Among the boys of Kepha is an athletic youth from Mississippi who dives for footballs but also hurries from room to room in a nursing home to deliver a warm hugs to the elderly. There are the Florida skateboarding brothers who survived numerous falls and love to place pro-life literature on cars. "Tiny" is the 6'2" 13-year old Texan who listened to a spiritual reflection one night on the Buffalo River while he tossed a toad in the air. Then there is the Louisiana boy who paused on our 10-mile pro-life walkathon to shake hands with a deceased armadillo. In Kepha one discovers ordinary boys who have left their socks, shoes and towels in seven states.

The boys of Kepha are also authentically Catholic. Consider "Cannonball," the boy who exclaimed, when he learned that one of the mom's was pregnant with her ninth child: "Oh my gosh! Are they blessed or what!?" On a crowded airplane the boys once took turns praying the Divine Mercy. The ACLU may foster outlawing prayer in public schools, but it can't stop the boys and men of Purple from praying on a 727!

The Kepha approach is simple. We do together what none of us would do alone. At a family beach retreat we engaged the day with relay races, horse fights, volleyball, and surf dodge ball. But at 2 AM, we lifted our purple crosses and walked for an hour in a silent prayerful procession along the shore as the moon lighted the ocean. The next morning we discovered a 100 feet wide message carved into the sand: "Kepha Rocks!" On another occasion before proceeding to our day of hiking and swimming, we worked at the Missionaries of Charity soup kitchen. Later, we drove to a remote area to knock on the door of a run down trailer. When the toothless, old man answered we gave him 50 bags of groceries. He told us he was worrying where his next meal would come from.

Kepha is Catholic to the core. It is with joy that we profess belief the Real Presence, the reality of hell and the power of confession. We uphold the sinfulness of abortion and contraception. We take chastity seriously. We do not compromise truth or hide our Catholicism. After a full day of whitewater rafting, we

sat at the back of the public bus praying the Divine Mercy. A lady rebuked us for not praying to ourselves. In spite of her angry, red face we did the honorable thing -- we continued to honor the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Someone once accused us of being too conservative because mortification is a part of our charism. Another accused us of being too liberal for playing hard on Sundays. But Kepha is neither Left nor Right. No agendas. No nonsense. Our purple shirts bear the words, "Where Peter is, there is the Church." We align ourselves with the Pope and do not apologize for that fidelity. As Pier Giorgio said, "To live without faith, without a patrimony to defend, without a steady struggle for truth, that is not living but merely existing." Someone once remarked that Kepha injects a healthy dose of orthodox testosterone back into the Church.

Kepha is not "politically correct." Kepha dads make a giant circle with 30 of our boys inside and play a fast-paced game of dodge ball. At a time when silly ideas are outlawing dodge ball because losing hurts a kid's self esteem, we teach our sons that to get right back up from a defeat is to be a winner. On one monthly retreat the boys competed to see who could stand the longest in the freezing water of a mountain stream. We believe that much of our nation's misery is a result of pampered wills that were never challenged to learn the honor in delayed gratification. As our sons mature they have two paths open to them. They can embrace a life of appeasement and excuses, becoming the antithesis of the Man on the Cross; or they can develop an iron will like Christ in spite of their natural weaknesses and limitations.

The quest for an iron will is a part of Kepha that is often neglected in youth groups. Kepha saturates our sons in an exciting Catholic culture that seeks to model Jesus, a real man of extreme courage and electrifying heroism. Jesus did not die so that young people could feel good. He died so they can become good. Kepha teaches our boys to flex their spiritual muscles, proving in the process that they can develop the toughness to overcome themselves. They also learn to stand in front of the gathered boys and dads of Kepha and give oral reports on our heroes, the saints.

The five components of Kepha's charism are apologetics, brotherhood, charity, mortification and prayer. We follow the example of our Big 3: St. John Bosco, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati. We have one event a month, usually a weekend retreat. Brotherhood Chapters are now developing in Texas, Oklahoma and New York. Currently our members live in Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida and Texas. Our major events for this year include a trip to Rome, the Proud of the Priesthood ten-mile walkathon and rally, a Father-Son Chastity retreat, and the end of the year Family Beach Retreat in Florida. Roughly one third of our events are open to the entire family.

Boys enter Kepha as early as age 8 and maintain membership through adulthood. Boys 5 to 8 can join the Saints Squad. Each month the boys learn a new Bible verse that defends a Catholic doctrine. The boys raise money to fund their retreats and are required by our Constitution to give half of all money they raise to charity. In the past four years our Kepha boys have donated over \$16,000 to charities. Between events our commitments glue us together: daily morning prayers, daily recitation of Divine Mercy or the Rosary, a weekly act of mortification, monthly Adoration, frequent Confession, studying apologetics verses, and completing their daily at home.

In everything we do we strive to reflect on the prayer of Pier Giorgio: "I beg you to pray for me a little, so that God may give me an iron will that does not bend and does not fail in his projects." Kepha in its fifth year. It has been an exciting journey.

Comments About Kepha

"Thanks so much for your letter and the wonderful pictures that reminded me of your visit. You are a great bunch of guys."

Archbishop Charles Chaput, Denver

"Keep up the good work. I sense that perhaps many of you will be priests someday."
Fr. Richard Doerr, Co-founder of the Frassati Society

"The Holy Father has asked me to thank you for the letter which the members of KEPHA sent him. He very much appreciates your devoted sentiments. His Holiness will remember you in his prayers. Invoking upon you joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ, he cordially imparts his Apostolic blessing."
Msgr. Pedro Lopez Quintanan, Vatican Assessor

"Thanks for a great weekend. I truly enjoyed my day for life."
Fr. Pat Angelucci, SDB - Provincial of the Salesian Order, U.S.

"I am so happy to have met you and I have the impression you are doing great things with your KEPHA boys."
Wanda Gawronska, niece of Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati - comments on KEPHA's Rome trip where we met Wanda and her 100-year old mother, Luciana, sister of Bl. Pier Giorgio.

"Whereas, Evangelium Vitae specifically aspires to promote the sanctity of life...to inject society with a spirit of dynamic orthodoxy and compassionate brotherhood; the increase awareness and support of organizations in our area protecting human life; to give glory to God, the Author of Life; to support Pope John Paul II, Guardian of the Keys. Now, therefore, I, M.J. 'Mike' Foster, Jr., Governor of the state of Louisiana, do hereby proclaim Sunday, April 30, 2000, as EVANGELIUM VITAE 2000 DAY in the greater metropolitan area of New Orleans and the state of Louisiana."
Mike Foster, Louisiana Governor, declaration for KEPHA's Evangelium Vitae 2000 event.

For information about this dynamic Catholic Father/Son organization please contact:

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